The Great Depression in American novel: A critical study in the novels of John Steinbeck, Nathanael West and Dos Passos

Final Synopsis

Submitted to

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2013

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The Great Depression

The Great Depression was an economic slump in North America, Europe, and other industrialized areas of the world that began in 1929 and lasted until about 1939. It was the longest and most severe depression ever experienced by the industrialized Western world.

Though the U.S. economy had gone into depression six months earlier, the Great Depression may be said to have begun with a catastrophic collapse of stock-market prices on the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929. During the next three years stock prices in the United States continued to fall, until by late 1932 they had dropped to only about 20 percent of their value in 1929. Besides ruining many thousands of individual investors, this precipitous decline in the value of assets greatly strained banks and other financial institutions, particularly those holding stocks in their portfolios. Many banks were consequently forced into insolvency; By 1933, 11,000 of the United States banks had failed. The failure of so many banks, combined with a general and nationwide loss of confidence in the economy, led to much-reduced levels of spending and demand and hence of production, thus aggravating the downward spiral. The result was deterioration output and drastically rising unemployment; by 1932, U.S. manufacturing output get down to 54 percent of its level in 1929, and unemployment had up raised to between 12 and 15 million workers, or 25-30 percent of the work force.

As a matter of convenience, this research work has been divided into five chapters:

1) Chapter One — Introduction
2) Chapter Two — John Steinbeck
3) Chapter Three — Nathanael West
4) Chapter Four — John Dos Passos
5) Chapter Five — Conclusion

Chapter One: Introduction

The introductory Chapter focuses on the brief history of American Novel during the Depression era from 1929 to 1940 .The Great Depression began in the United States but quickly turned into a worldwide economic slump owing to the special and intimate relationships that had been forged between the United States and European economies after World War I. The United States had emerged from the war as the major creditor and financier of postwar Europe, whose national economies had been greatly weakened by the war itself, by war debts, and, in the case of Germany and other defeated nations, by the need to pay war reparations. So once the American economy slumped and the flow of American investment credits to Europe dried up, prosperity tended to collapse. The Depression hit hardest

on those nations that were most deeply indebted to the United States, Germany and Great Britain. In Germany, unemployment rose sharply beginning in late 1929 and by early 1932 it had reached upto 6 million workers, or 25 percent of the work force. Britain was less severely affected, but its industrial and export sectors remained seriously depressed until World War II. Many other countries had been affected by the slump by 1931.

Almost all nations sought to protect their domestic production by imposing tariffs, raising existing ones, and setting quotas on foreign imports. The effect of these restrictive measures was to greatly reduce the volume of international trade: by 1932 the total value of world trade had fallen by more than half as country after country took measures against the importation of foreign goods.

The Great Depression had important consequences in the political sphere. In the United States, economic distress led to the election of the Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency in late 1932. Roosevelt introduced a number of major changes in the structure of the American economy, using increased government regulation and massive public-works projects to promote a recovery. But despite this active intervention, mass unemployment and economic stagnation continued, though on a somewhat reduced scale, with about 15 percent of the work force still unemployed in 1939 at the outbreak of World War II. After that, unemployment dropped rapidly as American factories were flooded with orders from overseas for armaments and munitions. The depression ended completely soon after the United States' entry into World War II in 1941. In Europe, the Great Depression strengthened extremist forces and lowered the prestige of liberal

democracy. In Germany, economic distress directly contributed to Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933. The Nazis' public-works projects and their rapid expansion of munitions production ended the Depression there by 1936.

Chapter Two: John Steinbeck

John Ernst Steinbeck, a short story writer and novelist, was one of America's most widely read authors. Noted for his realistic portrayals of people searching for the golden land and happiness.

Accepting the Nobel Prize in Sweden, Steinbeck said: "The ancient commission of the writer has not changed. He is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement. Furthermore, the writer is delegated to declare and to celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit—for gallantry in defeat—for courage, compassion, and love. In the endless war against weakness and despair, these are the bright rally-flags of hope and of emulation. I hold that a writer, who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man, has no dedication nor any membership in literature."

The Grapes of Wrath

John Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize-winning epic ***The Grapes of Wrath*** (1939) about the Great Depression follows the western movement of one family and a nation in search of work and human dignity. Perhaps the most American of American classics. It is considered as a masterpiece. It won the National Book Award, favorite fiction book of 1939, voted by members of

the American Booksellers Association. it was the best-selling book of 1939 and 430,000 copies had been printed by February 1940.

The novel focuses on the Joads, a poor family of sharecroppers driven from their Oklahoma home by drought, economic hardship, and changes in financial and agricultural industries . Due to their nearly hopeless situation, and in part because they were trapped in the Dust Bowl, the Joads set out for California. Along with thousands of other "Okies", they sought jobs, land, dignity and a future. When preparing to write the novel, Steinbeck wrote: "I want to put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards who are responsible for this the Great Depression and its effects".He wants to illustrate the hardship and oppression suffered by migrant laborers during the Great Depression.

Cannery Row

The Depression is over, but no one has a good situation and there is not even a mark of goodness and omen, still the bitterness is in the society. So the *Cannery Row* came out in 1945, just a few months before the end World War II. Steinbeck wrote it for soldiers. In his own words, it was: *a kind of nostalgic thing, written for a group of soldiers who said to me, "Write something funny that isn't about the war. Write something for us to read—we're sick of war"*

In *Cannery Row*, John Steinbeck describes the unholy community of 1930s Monterey, California. Cannery Row is a street that depends on canning sardines. It is where all the outcasts of society reside. Steinbeck himself, in the first sentence of the book, describes *Cannery Row* as "a

poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, nostalgia, a dream."

Cannery Row does not have much of a plot, but it is still very active as a social document about the attitudes of society during the depression era of the 1930's. Although the book was published after World War II had ended, it strongly suggests the Depression period with both tone and spirit. The majority of the people in the novel are the unemployed and poverty stricken good people . Since this novel was more of a nostalgic piece of work about the Depression than a serious novel, Steinbeck's views on society and the economy was approached with a more comical and laid back approach. The novel showed a time where people were valued by not what they had in their possession, but what they had in their hearts.

Chapter-3 Nathanael West

Nathanael West was born Nathan Weinstein in New York City on October 17, 1903. (He legally changed his name in 1926.) West was the son of Jewish immigrants Max Weinstein, a prosperous building contractor, and Anna Wallenstein Weinstein. Mr. Weinstein wanted his son to go into the family business and gave Nathan copies of the Horatio Alger books, a series of novels in which honest young men do well for themselves in business. West, whose friends gave him the nickname Pep because he was so lazy, was uninterested in the typical trappings of upper middle-class success and dropped out of high school. He lied his way into Tufts University, which expelled him for poor grades, and then got himself admitted to Brown University by using someone else's transcripts. West graduated from Brown

in 1924, where he was better known for his sense of humor and interest in parties than any scholarly abilities.

The Day of the Locust

The Day of the Locust is a 1939 novel by American author Nathanael West, set in Hollywood, California, during the Great Depression. Its themes deal with the alienation and desperation of a broad group of odd individuals who exist at the fringes of the Hollywood movie industry.

The Day of the Locust is a novel about Hollywood and its corrupting touch, about the American dream turned into a sun-drenched California nightmare. Nathaniel West's Hollywood is not the glamorous "home of the stars" but a seedy world of little people, some hopeful, some despairing, all twisted by their by their own desires from the ironically romantic artist narrator to a macho movie cowboy, a middle-aged innocent from America's heartland, and the hard-as-nails call girl would-be-star whom they all lust after. An unforgettable portrayal of a world that mocks the real and rewards the sham, turns its back on love to plunge into empty sex, and breeds a savage violence that is its own undoing, this novel stands as a classic indictment of all that is most extravagant and uncontrolled in American life.

Miss Lonelyhearts

Miss Lonelyhearts, published in 1933, is Nathanael West's second novel. It is an Expressionist black comedy set in New York City during the Great Depression.

The general tone of the novel is one of extreme disillusionment with Depression-era American society, a consistent theme throughout West's novels. The novel can be read as a condemnation of alienation and the colonization of social life by commodification, foreshadowing the stance of the situationists and Guy Debord in particular. Miss Lonelyhearts is unable to fulfill his role as advice giver in a world in which both people and advice (in the form of newspaper ads, for example) are mass produced. People are machines for the sole purpose of laboring as far as the rest of society is concerned (thus Miss Lonelyhearts' name), and any advice for them is as mass produced as a manual for a machine. Lonelyhearts is unable to find a personal solution to his problems because they have systemic causes.

Chapter Four - John Dos Passos

John Dos Passos, the illegitimate son of a prominent American attorney, John Randolph Dos Passos Jr., was born in Chicago in 1896.

Dos Passos was active in the campaign against the growth of fascism in Europe. He joined other literary figures such as Dashiell Hammett, Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman and Ernest Hemingway in supporting the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War.

The Big Money

The Big Money (1936) is the third and final book of the U.S.A. Trilogy is by far the best of the set. By this time in the collective story, World War I is over, and Dos Passos' is clearly becoming disillusioned with the socialist doctrine... leaning more towards free market enterprise. This is clearly reflected in his writing.

Dos Passos is an author from the "Lost Generation," a term Gertrude Stein used to describe American bohemian-modernist writers of the 1920s and 1930s who lived in Europe during World War I and the Depression years. His novel *The Big Money* (1936) marks the end of that Lost Generation, a time of disillusionment, cynicism, and youthful idealism. Dos Passos, along with his fellow writers, witnessed the horrors of war and contemplated the true meaning of life and humanity, particularly in terms of American materialism and excess. Ironically, due to Dos Passos's changing political views, he became relatively unknown compared to Stein, Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, and other members of the Lost Generation.

The Adventures of a Young Man

In District of Columbia (1952), his second trilogy, Dos passos becomes increasingly attentive to the problem of the relation of man to the "machine" In these novels; the "machines" is more often portrayed as a specific organization or group such as a political system. The non-fiction published since 1940 has also generally revealed the same change.

We can see in this novel that the American society isn't really given too much in the way of historical perspective or self-analysis. Just about everything that happened in the last hundred years is "so last century" that we forget the lessons of American grandfathers or great-grandmothers, those who lived through the deprivations of the Great Depression.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This chapter will be the last chapter and the core of this study. This chapter will offer a thoroughly researched hypothesis establishing the critical study of the novelists and how the great writers depicted more than one theme in their novels reflecting the contemporary issues of his time in a quiet different way.

After a thoroughly and a rich discussion of the Great Depression and the side effects of The Great Depression in the American Novel, this chapter will present the results of this study.

The probable results of this study which can be taken for research work and will be beneficial for society in particular and world in those great Novelists handle the problems of the individuals caused by the Great Depression and the other aspects which made the American society affected.

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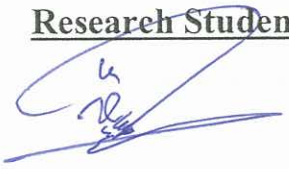

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